Teaching English in China: Language, literature, culture, and social implications*

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提要: 中国有英语教学, 始自 1862 年同文馆之建立。由于种种原因, 中国的英语教学长期以来只片面强调语言基本功的训练, 而忽视了文学和文化背景的认识。结果是学生既缺乏对西方文化的了解, 又缺乏中国传统文化知识。没有跨文化交往的能力, 也就不能应付他们面临的实际工作。我们必须重新审视教学内容, 不仅设置英国文学和西方文化的课程, 而且设置用英语讲授中国文化和比较研究的课程, 以求培养出既有语言表达能力, 又有文化修养和独立批判精神的优秀学生。

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It is perhaps a sign of the times, so to speak, and certainly an indication of the maturity of English as an academic discipline in China that we now gather together at the Beijing Foreign Studies University in a self-reflective mode to discuss and debate the many issues, pedagogic and otherwise, that have long been with us in the teaching of English in China. At the same time it is also an indication of the availability of an open and favorable condition today for such discussion and debate that we are here to reflect on the nature and methodology of what we do in China's English departments at the present time. Without doubt, the issues we discuss are important ones, and their importance goes far beyond the mere acquisition of a foreign language and the procurement of linguistic skills.

In this context, perhaps a bit of historical retrospection is in order because the teaching of English in China can be dated back to a precise moment in history, i.e., 1862, when Tongwen Guan (同文馆) or the Interpreters' College was set up by the late Qing government in the wake of the Opium Wars and a series of humiliations and unequal treaties, which had forced upon the imperial court and the ruling elites the necessity of learning about the West for China's own benefit of self-strengthening and rejuvenation. The first step in responding to the situation was to learn the languages of the West, and the first language taught at the Interpreters' College was English. "The prime object of the college is to train young men for the public service, especially as agents of international intercourse," says W. A. P. Martin, an American missionary appointed by the Qing government to be the first president of the Interpreters' College. Martin traced the establishment of the College to a demand made by the British in a treaty, which "contains a provision that English dispatches shall for a pe-

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riod of three years be accompanied by a Chinese translation, within which time the Chinese government was expected to provide a corps of competent interpreters."[1] Teaching English in China thus started as a response to a foreign demand overshadowed by unequal treaties, but a memorandum Prince Gong (恭亲王) and his colleagues sent to the throne in October 1861, which is also quoted in Martin's book, provides yet another, and quite different, perspective for understanding the early history of the Interpreters' College. In that memorandum, Prince Gong spoke of "knowledge of the character and institutions of foreign nations" as "indispensable," and expressed the "conviction that to know the state of the several nations it is necessary first to understand their language and letters. This is the sole means to protect ourselves from becoming the victims of crafty imposition."[2] From this we understand that it was in the interest of self-protection and self-strengthening that reform-minded Chinese elites at the time argued for the necessity of learning foreign languages.

From the very beginning, then, teaching English in China has been closely related to social and political changes in modern history, and it is often caught in the double bind of both contributing to China's modernization by introducing Western ideas, scientific knowledge, and advanced technologies and, at the same time, weakening and dissolving the fabric of traditional culture and society by bringing in Western concepts, values, and customs. Conservative forces often attacked English as the language of the foreign devil. In 1867, the Interpreters' College "was fiercely attacked for teaching occult 'computational arts' (*shu-shu*) and for 'honoring barbarians as teachers' (*fengyi wei shi*). The stigma of learning barbarian skills from alien teachers," as Richard Smith observes, "made Western-inspired change of any sort extremely difficult to initiate, much less to sustain."[3] Indeed, for a very long time, that "stigma of learning barbarian skills" or, in the later incarnations of the same idea, the charges of "worshipping the foreign," "bourgeois liberalization," "spiritual pollution" and the like, often made English and other kinds of Western-style learning scapegoats for China's social and political problems at different times. We must reject such base and baseless charges and be very clear that teaching English in China is not only necessary, but crucial in facilitating international and intercultural communication between China and the rest of the world, the importance of which hardly needs to be argued for today.

For quite a long time, however, ideological pressure made it necessary to separate the teaching of English as a language from teaching the substance of English texts that might be suspect of containing dangerous foreign ideas, even the influence of imperialism and colonialism. As a result, much of English literature and many culturally significant texts are still not read, which has real consequences in the training of students at the various institutions and programs. Graduates from China's English departments may have a good grasp of grammar and basic linguistic skills, but they usually do not know much about English literature, nor do they have much understanding of English or European culture and history. They may be able to speak English, but they usually do not write well for lack of a sophisticated sense of style and literary excellence, and they cannot communicate effectively for lack of knowledge and cultural literacy that are prerequisite for an intelligent discussion of any subject in depth.

The fact is that language and ideas are in-

separable. The Aristotelian definition of man — that man is the animal that has *logos* — as H. G. Gadamer argues, though traditionally understood as *animal rationale* or a rational being, should first and foremost be understood as "the living being that has language" (*der Mensch ist das Lebewesen, das Sprache hat*)[4]. The Greek word *logos* and, by an uncanny coincidence, the Chinese word *dao* (道) all have the dual meanings of speech and that of which is spoken, *oratio* and *ratio*, language and thinking.[5] To separate language from literary and cultural substance is therefore as wrong pedagogically as to teach students the notes and the musical scale without teaching them a song. The result is predictable: they know how to sing, but they do not know what to sing; they can speak, but they have nothing to say. I do not mean that our graduates have no ideas of their own, but by substance in teaching English I am referring to exemplary texts of good English, especially great works of literature that help the learner to cultivate a sense of language and style, a sense of balance, elegance, rhythm, and cadence.

Literature here should be understood broadly as exemplary and important texts that demonstrate what good English is and train the students to think and reason logically. It is my conviction that the best way to learn a language is through literature and the reason for that is simple: the most effective, powerful, and beautiful expressions in a language are often found in its literature. Without at least some basic knowledge of classical poetry, without some familiarity with such great novels as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (《三国演义》), the *Water Margin* (《水浒》), and the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (《红楼梦》), not to mention many important modern texts, one cannot hope to reach a high level of Chinese. By the same token, one cannot hope to have a good command of English if one has never been exposed to what is good English in the first place. True proficiency in a language surely begins with linguistic competence as the first step, but it never stops there. Literary and cultural competence is far more important in building up one's confidence and ease in using a foreign language. For today's students, even though they may use English for practical purposes in business or commerce, literary and cultural competence is the vital element that will give them the ability to communicate effectively and do whatever they are required to do with elegance and style.

But teaching literature and culture has a whole set of different problems. In the academic world today, it is not so much conservative critics in China but scholars of literary and cultural theories in the West that are questioning the ideological content of Western canonical works and interrogating traditional literature and culture for their gender biases, racial prejudices, and political incorrectness. Should we teach our students literature when students in the West are now more interested in theory and popular culture, in ideological critiques of literature from the perspectives of feminism, Orientalism, post-colonialism, and so on? Should we teach canonical works of English literature when those very works are being decanonized and deconstructed in British and American universities? To answer these questions, I would suggest that we look at the teaching of English in India, where colonial and post-colonial are not purely theoretical abstracts, but historical experiences and political realities. "The teaching of English literature in India has always been problematic, though it would appear to be the case that it has only recently been properly 'problematized,'" says Harish Trivedi, a senior Indian scholar who has

written extensively on post-colonialism, translation, and comparative literature. Trivedi implies that the "problematizing" of English literature in ways that are "proper" in the West is not an Indian initiative. "Only yesterday," he continues, "have we begun asking questions about canon, context, relevance, reception, response, the other, the alternative (alter-native?), historicism old and new, Orientalism, feminism, and the all-Derriding Theory, and this for the good reason that such questions began to be asked about English literature in England and America the day before yesterday."[6] Ironically, then, literary studies in post-colonial India still follows what is done in England and North America, and that irony is brought to the fore when Trivedi remarks that the critique of Orientalism, for example, "seems to be very much an ideological need of the Western academy than of an Eastern one, and to that extent for us a version of neo-orientalism in itself. ... If the post-colonial liberal-guilty West now seeks to beat its breast by exposing how precisely its dominance of the East was constructed, it does not follow that we too should unthinkingly do the same."[7]

That is exactly the kind of critical stance I believe scholars in the East — in China, India, and the other Asian countries — should take with regard to Western literature and Western theories. Indeed, why should we in the East unthinkingly and blindly follow the protocols of a discourse and practice that respond to very different cultural and political situations in the West? Isn't such blind copying of Western theoretical discourse an ironic rehearsal of the very Orientalism or colonialism criticized by the theories of Orientalism and post-colonialism? In any case, teaching English in China is different from teaching English in America; it is under very different social conditions and with different needs, therefore it would be a mistake to confuse the one with the other. Just as we now realize that the wholesale critique of traditional Chinese culture during the May Fourth movement at the beginning of the 20th century was unduly excessive and destructive, we must also look at the current radical critique of Western culture in the Western academia with caution and moderation.

To criticize presupposes knowledge and thorough understanding, because true critique is always an informed and intelligent critique, not a simple rejection. Allow me to share with you a personal experience here. Once in teaching a graduate seminar in California on the history of criticism, I used an anthology edited by David Richter as textbook, with the title *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. In the very first class, after I explained what was expected of my students, one graduate student immediately raised a question à la Foucault, whose idea of the complicity of knowledge with power had a tremendous influence on generations of American students in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, which led them to question knowledge of whatever kind as a matter of course. The fact that I was the professor who chose as required reading a textbook which had determined what constituted a "tradition" and "classic texts," —all these seemed to signal a suspicious combination of knowledge, power, and control. "How can we as students," asked that young man, "come up with a critique of what are already called the 'tradition' and 'classic texts'?" I knew only too well the student's eagerness to show that he's nothing if not critical, but I was amused to see how utterly vague and confused his idea of "critique" was. "What I call critique is an informed one," I replied. "You should first read the text and find out what's wrong with it; then you can come up with a cri-

tique and an argument. True criticism is not your average American teenage rebellion: whatever dad says yes, I'll say no. That's not critique and has no teeth in it." I believe the analogy carried my point for him, and the point is simple: without carefully studying a text by yourself, you cannot form an independent opinion as to its merits or defects, and you can hardly judge whether a critique of the text is valid or invalid. In rejecting the classic even before you read it, you are not being critical, but are simply following a critical authority without thinking it through, which is the opposite of what the critical spirit is all about. Independent critical thinking is probably the most valuable thing one can get in education, particularly in higher education, and critical thinking does not mean to follow whatever is fashionable at the time in literary and cultural theory, but to criticize on the basis of knowledge, understanding, and reason. Independent critical thinking means to form a critical view all one's own.

But how does one form a view of one's own? What is the basis on which we can build up our own knowledge and critical judgment? Each of us is born into a language, culture, and society that form the very foundation of our identity and our historically determined "horizon." The hermeneutic concept of horizon refers to the field of vision from which it is possible for us to see and understand things, i.e., our linguistic, cultural and social upbringing that profoundly influences the ways in which we see things.[8] It should be clear then that for us as Chinese students and scholars, knowledge of our own language and culture provides the solid ground to stand, the basic horizon from which we can see things and expand our range of vision. Here, however, we face a difficulty inherent in the very organization of knowledge in the modern university, namely, the specialization made necessary by the expansion of knowledge in the modern world, the enrollment of students in various disciplines, departments, and programs. One serious consequence of this compartmentalization of knowledge, particularly noticeable among students of English in China, is that English majors are often inadequate in their knowledge of Chinese literature and culture, particularly the classical tradition. This may be a major reason why many of our graduates are not well equipped in intercultural communication, because such communication presupposes a good understanding of your own culture so that you may intelligently explore the possibilities of comparison and exchange with other cultures. If we are serious about improving the quality of teaching in China's English departments, we must solve this problem in one way or another.

Not so many generations ago, when training in classical Chinese was still very strong in society at large, scholars like Wu Mi (吴宓), Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书), Xu Yanmou (徐燕谋), and Wu Xinghua (吴兴华), just to mention a few, not only taught English in universities but were also very knowledgeable in the classical Chinese tradition. Qian Zhongshu in particular is well known today for his scholarly works on Chinese classics, written in the classical language, but he majored in English at old Tsinghua and studied English literature at Oxford, and if he had not been assigned to work in the Institute of Chinese Literature in the Academy of Social Sciences, he would probably have written on European literature and culture[9]. Of course, a great genius like Qian Zhongshu can never be completely bound by circumstances, and his erudition and scholarship simply rise above the narrow boundaries of disciplines and specialties to encompass both the Chinese and the Western

traditions. As Simon Leys said of him many years ago, in his knowledge of both the Chinese and Western traditions as well as of world literature, Qian Zhongshu " *n'a pas son pareil aujourd'hui en Chine et même dans le monde*."[10]

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that we can produce any time soon well-read students like Qian Zhongshu in his college days at old Tsinghua, but that should at least be the ideal goal we strive for. To require students of English to take certain courses in classical Chinese literature and history may be one way towards reaching that goal, and teaching substantial subjects in English beyond purely linguistic competence may be another. Perhaps entire curricula need to be reviewed and reformulated in order to have a whole new orientation and to make China's English departments true depositories of knowledge where students not only can learn a foreign language, but can benefit from an all-round education. At the same time, it seems to me even more important to develop a culture of reading beyond one's discipline and specialty, to cultivate a sense of intellectual curiosity among our students, and to encourage them to explore issues in East-West comparative studies not superficially, but with real depth and thorough understanding. Of course, to be good in English is not easy, to be good in both English and Chinese and a wide range of other subjects is extremely difficult, but only by facing the difficult challenge and overcoming it can we hope to gain valuable results, to enhance the quality of the students we train, and to meet the demand of better education in today's highly competitive world. We certainly have a great deal of work to do, but by putting our minds together, we may hope to find ways to do our work better, to improve the quality of our students, and to make the teaching of English an important contribution to China's success in higher education.

Notes

1. W. A. P. Martin, *A Cycle of Cathay, or China, South and North with Personal Reminiscences* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1896), p. 295.
2. Ibid., p. 296.
3. *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization: His Journals, 1863-1866*, eds. Richard J. Smith et al. (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991), p. 292. For the obstacles and criticisms the Interpreters' College faced in its brief history, see also Knight Biggerstaff, *The Earliest Modern Government Schools in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 140-147.
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Mensch und Sprache," *Hermeneutik II: Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), p. 146. For English translation, see "Man and Language," in G-G Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 60.
5. For a full discussion, see Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). A Chinese translation is available as 《道与逻各斯》, 冯川译(四川人民出版社, 1998). See also 钱钟书,《管锥编》(北京: 中华书局, 1986), 页 408-409.
6. Harish Trivedi, "*Panchadhatu*: Teaching English Literature in the Indian Literary Context," in *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1993), p. 229.
7. Ibid., Intro., p. 20.
8. "Horizon," says Gadamer, "is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. . . . Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., English trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 302.
9. See 杨绛,《我们仨》(香港: 牛津大学出版社, 2003), 页 188: "钟书很委屈。他对于中国古典文学, 不是科班出身。他在大学里学的是外国文学, 教的是外国文学。他由清华大学调入文研所, 也属外文组。放弃外国文学研究而选注宋诗, 他并不愿意。"
10. Simon Leys (Pierre Rychmans): "Sa connaissance de la littérature chinoise, du patrimoine occidental, de la littérature universelle, est prodigieuse. Qian Zhongshu n'a pas son pareil aujourd'hui en Chine et même dans le monde." *Le Monde*, June 10, 1983.

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Abstracts of major papers in this issue

On strengthening humanistic education in the English language curriculum, by *HU Wenzhong* & *SUN Youzhong* (Beijing Foreign Studies Univ., Beijing 100089, P. R. China), p. 243

This paper argues that English language education is faced with the danger of trivializing education by reducing it to vocational training and that a curriculum review is called for. In changing the status quo, traditional subjects such as British and American literature, linguistics and studies of English-speaking countries should be maintained and further strengthened. In the meanwhile efforts should be made to offer a greater variety of humanities courses. Teaching methods should likewise be changed. The authors contend that to accomplish these it is essential to reform the present curriculum and to set up new teacher education programmes.

Teaching English in China: Language, literature, culture, and social implications, *ZHANG Longxi* (Dept. of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, P. R. China), p. 248

The teaching of English in China started with the establishment of the Interpreters' College in 1862 as a response to the pressure of Western imperialist powers, but also for the purpose of China's self-strengthening and modernization. For a long time, however, owing to political and ideological reasons, English was taught as a language, while English literature and Western culture were suppressed as politically suspect and dangerous. As a result, graduates from China's English departments are generally ill-equipped to communicate effectively and to deal with the task they face in today's competitive world for lack of literary competence and cultural knowledge. We need to reexamine the entire curricula and design courses not only in English literature and culture, but in Chinese and comparative studies as well so that we may produce students with better linguistic skills, adequate cultural knowledge, and a mature and critical mind.

Word order and animacy as sentence processing cues for Chinese-English bilinguals, by *DONG Yanping* & *LIU Yuhua* (Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong Univ. of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510420, P. R. China), p. 257

This study investigates how Chinese-English bilinguals (beginner, intermediate and advanced bilinguals) use the cues of word order and animacy to interpret Chinese and English sentences. The experiment results indicate that in both English and Chinese sentence processing, animacy and word order were important cues for all levels of bilinguals, but animacy was generally stronger than word order. However, with the development of L2, word order tended to produce stronger effect on sentence interpretation. The one exception to that tendency is the performance of the advanced group who were less influenced by word order than the intermediate group. When animacy was held constant, relative animacy or potency — a semantic cue more universal than animacy — exerted greater effect than word order.

The use of sentence builders and the development of L2 oral fluency, by *MIAO Haiyan* & *SUN Lan* (School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi Normal Univ., Nanchang 330022, P. R. China), p. 265

Within the Levelt (1989) model and Gobet & Simon's (1996) template theory, this paper explores the correlation between the use of sentence builders and the development of L2 oral fluency. Speech samples from three proficiency groups of L2 learners are examined in detail so as to see the development of oral fluency of these learners and their use of sentence builders as well. Research results indicate that (1) the use of sentence builders and the development of oral fluency are closely correlated; (2) although the number of sentence builders used does not increase significantly with language proficiency levels, the discourse functions of sentence builders do vary with the increase of the learners' language proficiency; (3) a plateau effect occurs in the development of L2 oral fluency.

Tonality in Chinese EFL learners' read speech, by *CHEN Hua* (School of Foreign Studies, Nantong Univ., Nantong